

Lost over Vietnam

Dick Jones '63

In going through flight school, I had two good friends, both US Marine Lts at the time. While studying at NAS Saufley, Pensacola, Fla, we many times car pooled with a number of other basic flight students. One of these good friends we will call "Lt Smith," just to protect his rightful identity. Smith was a flight student, but Smith did not like to fly! How, and more importantly, why could this be? Do not know, but it was. I remember many times while carpooling to Saufley on a day when Smith was scheduled to fly, we encountered the need to stop somewhere along the way so that Smith could get out of the car to throw up because he was so upset about his upcoming flight that day. Talk about strange! At any rate, Smith completed the T-34 syllabus satisfactorily and, in fact, actually advanced to the T-2, Buckeye, basic jet syllabus at NAAS Chase Field, Meridian, MS. He also completed that program and advanced to the F-9 and F-11 programs in Texas. Smith got his USN Wings of Gold in Texas and received orders to a USMC A-4 squadron. Smith ended up in Vietnam same time that I was there, 1966-1967. He was assigned to an A-4 squadron flying out of the East Field, Chu Lai. At the time, a new pilot would typically spend 6+ months in an operational squadron. They were then typically assigned to some alternate billet, possibly a job with the Marine Aircraft Group or an assignment in the field as a forward air controller with an infantry unit, or some other similar billet. Once Smith had flown enough missions to be considered respectable, he lobbied hard to get out of the squadron as soon as possible. Smith got a job with MAG-12 at Chu Lai. After assignment to such a billet, the newly reassigned pilot still had to complete enough flight hours each month to qualify for flight pay and continuation in a flight status. Most did so via periodic temporary assignment back to a squadron to fly on that squadron's flight schedule in order to acquire the needed flight hours. One might also be assigned to ferry aircraft both to and from Japan where the heavier maintenance was done on the aircraft. Smith worked his way into those ferry assignments and completed a number of these

to/from ferry flights. On what I recall was his third or fourth upcoming flight leg from NAS Cubi Point, PI back to the USMC base at Chu Lai, RVN, a memorable event occurred. The Cubi Point air controllers operated under the call sign "Yardstick." It was common knowledge that their radio capabilities were marginal, meaning that they frequently had limited or no radio contact that could be maintained. Cubi was also famous for a Tacan site (radio navigation site) that did not lock on well and frequently gave one an unlocked, or "spinning," tacan needle in the cockpit. Well, Smith launched out of Cubi one clear afternoon headed for Chu Lai, RVN on what was his third or fourth such flight. As one might expect, neither his radio contact with Yardstick nor his Tacan site lock worked well. Oh well, "it's just another day of flying out of NAS Cubi," was Smith's reaction. The flight from Cubi, PI to Chu Lai, RVN is about 500 miles, almost absolutely due west, compass heading 270 degrees. At 350+ knots, one should begin seeing the Vietnam coastline in 75 minutes or so. Approximately half way across that 500 mile distance and right on that 270 degree course, there is a huge reef right there in the middle of the South China Sea. It is donut shaped. That means that one can see a light blue/green shallow water donut down there in the middle of a deep blue South China Sea. It is actually quite pretty, especially to one who can use it as a backup navigation aid when making that 500 mile trip. On a clear day when one is at cruising altitude, it can be seen from 50+ miles away. A pilot sighting that reef knows that he is "right on track" in heading for Chu Lai. Well, Smith never saw that reef! Remember that his Tacan had been spinning and he had no radio contact with anyone for approximately the past 30+ minutes. If things had been working properly, his Tacan needle in the cockpit should have been pointing to the Cubi Point Tacan behind him for the past 30 minutes or so. At approximately the halfway point in the flight, proper procedure would have had Smith retuning the Tacan to Danang Tacan out ahead of him and retuning the radio to a Danang radio frequency. If working properly, the Tacan needle would have swung around and begun pointing at the nose of his aircraft and toward the Danang Tacan up ahead. At some point, he should have made radio contact with Danang. When he made that Tacan adjustment to the Danang Tacan station, the needle did not lock on to Danang Tacan, but kept spinning as it had been doing

since he departed Cubi. THEN THE TACAN LOCKED ON. It pointed approximately 40 degrees off to his starboard side. His reaction was to say to himself the following. "Self, there must be big winds out here today. I have been blown well South of my intended flight path and that must be why I did not see the halfway reef." He turned northward to a heading of approximately 320 degrees and put the Tacan needle on his nose to correct and get back on intended flight path. He was now flying happily along at 320 degrees and headed for home at Chu Lai. In Viet Nam, we had some potential problems areas with our Tacan equipment. First, it was at times subject to a built in error called a "forty degree lock on." It was also suspected that the "bad guys" had installed a decoy Tacan somewhere up north of Channel 109 which was a Tacan site in the vicinity of the DMZ. Smith pushed on to the Northwest until he finally sighted a coastline up ahead at about just over an hour of total flight time. Reaction, "ahh good, getting closer to home." Not long after, Smith found himself over the coastline, and there below him was an airfield. He spiraled down from cruise altitude to approximately 14,000 ft and began circling the airfield while attempting to identify what he intended to be the field at Chu Lai. "Ah good, concrete runway, revetments, gun positions, etc." "But I do not recognize the field as being Chu Lai." He felt that the wind had pushed him really far southward and that he was circling the new Air Force field recently built approximately 90 miles south of Chu Lai. I no longer remember the name of that field. At any rate, his conclusion was to turn northward, fly off the approximate 90 miles, and land at home base of Chu Lai. He turned northward up the coastline and climbed back to cruising altitude. Time of flight was now approximately 80 minutes or so and fuel was beginning to be a concern. After flying northward for 10 minutes or so, Smith decided that he was not doing the smartest thing that he could think of. He was lost in an unfriendly environment, getting low on fuel, could communicate with no one, and he was flying northward into an environment that was becoming more unfriendly with each mile that he flew. He turned southward and flew back over the airfield he had just left. Back down to a lower altitude and circling the field. His radio suddenly crackled on Guard frequency. Guard is a frequency normally reserved for emergency situations. "Aircraft on the 010 degree radial, 180 miles, Danang Tacan, come up frequency

XXX.XX. Smith switched frequencies on his radio and checked in. The radio crackled on the new frequency. "Aircraft on the 010 degree radial, 180 miles, Danang Tacan, go Buster, descend to minimum altitude practical, vector 190 degrees." "Buster is code for 100 percent power. In other words, go fast! On previous flights, Smith had become accustomed to running practice radar intercepts for the controlling agency in Danang, and he thought them to be setting such an intercept situation. Smith responded, "Danang radio, this is XXXX. Please be advised that I cannot play today." Danang radio's response-"Aircraft on the 010 degree radial, 180 miles, Danang Tacan, go Buster, descend to minimum altitude practical , vector 190 degrees." It was a repeat of their previous transmission. Smith's response-"Danang radio, I told you that I cannot play today. I am lost and low on fuel. I need your help for vector to Chu Lai." Danang radio repeated their previous transmission for the third time. Smith's respons-"Danang radio, I told you that I cannot play today. I need your help. Give me your controller number. I am going to turn you in." Danang came back once more thusly-"PLEASE SIR, Aircraft on the 010 degree radial , 180 miles, Danang Tacan, go buster, descend to minimum altitude altitude practical, vector 190, 180 miles for Danang airfield." Smith had twice been circling the Red Chinese Mig base on Hainan Island, North Vietnam, and did not realize it. We always speculated that he was not shot down as they hoped that he was a defector with a USN A-4, Skyhawk aircraft. This is the same base where a USN P-3, Orion, aircraft landed about ten years ago after being "buzzed" and damaged by a North Vietnamese Mig aircraft. Smith made it to Danang. More speculaton was that they would either pull his wings for such a stunt or they would give him an award for getting the aircraft home in an undamaged status. Don't know what ever happened to "Smith," but now you know the rest of the story. Be well all. Blessings. RCJ.